

The Great Research Bull

Hemall Chhapla

(Times of India 02 April 2008)

Personality traits of kho-kho players, hairy roots of apples, poets who wear silk, are among the research topics of PhD aspirants. The world of Indian nerds...

This may terrify you— Rhinotillexomania in an Adolescent Sample. Until you realise that Rhinotillexomania is nose picking. And that the seemingly reverential research title concerns the study of nose digging habits in chosen individuals.

Conducted across a sample size of 200 respondents, the research of B S Srihari from the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bangalore concluded that all the volunteers admitted to nose picking, with a median frequency of four times a day. Nearly 8 % picked the nose more than 20 times a day. Some even said that they ate what they found. Many, predictably, used their fingers, but 6.5% used tweezers and 4.5% used pencils.

Dr Chittaranjan Andrade, an MD working with NIMHANS and the research guide for the thesis, says that the subject was chosen by his student because he “wanted a simple but original topic, and one that could result in publication in one of the top 10 psychiatry journals in the world.”

The thesis is among the many obscure and baffling research efforts of Indians in pursuit of a PhD. One is researching the character of his neighbourhood park. Another has already studied the relaxation programmes of junior kabaddi players. A newly registered researcher is now analysing the personality traits of female kho-kho players in the Marathwada region.

He is studying the size of their nails, their “pants”, the way they speak and where they live. An analysis of the colours of tomatoes, and a comparison of rodent and human diets, too, are part of the Indian research activity. The scholars spend three to seven years on such studies.

Vandana Kameshwari from the Central Institute of Fisheries Education studied the growth of plankton using the wastes of cows, pigs and poultry. At the end of the research, which runs into hundreds of pages, she concluded that poultry litter is the best, followed by cow dung and pig dung. The same conclusion was reached in 1978 by another researcher.

Mysteriously, almost every Indian university has at least five theses that analyse the functioning of a co-operative bank in a particular district. "As if a cooperative bank in Jalgaon is going to be very different from the one in Jalaun," says an academician. Former vice chancellor of Bangalore University, M S Thimmappa, says, "most research is either repetitive or of no consequence at all." Senior professors say that such research efforts are not meant to enlighten the world but they are ruses to bag the PhD status.

In Bangalore University, a student in the sericulture department who did not find a guide in his stream got lucky with the literature department when he changed his thesis to study Kannada poets who wore silk garments.

"He has worked on why these poets wore silk *jubbas* and pyjamas. How useful is this to anyone?" asks a senior research guide. According to Thimmappa, "About 10% of the research on our shelves is good, but the remaining needs to be trashed."

Thesis departments are overflowing with research works that probably have no reference value. Somewhere in the thickets of bound papers in our universities are abstract researches, like one that delves into access to Power Point presentations in a particular district. And another tries to understand the concepts of an ideal man and woman. .

Diwan Nandini, from the Applied Psychology department of Mumbai University, distributed questionnaires to college students and asked them to write traits they would like in their ideal partner. After a few years, she concluded that women want men to be ambitious and masculine, and men want women to be feminine. Lalitha Dhara, a student from the department of statistics from Mumbai University, has pursued an MPhil dissertation on, 'Variation in Family Size due to Sex Preference and Stopping Rules'. The thesis is replete with probability equations on the number of trials a couple needs to have a "live son", "dead son", "live girl", "dead girl", before they "achieve their goal and can stop".

A student from the Dr Y S Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Nauni in Himachal Pradesh, has studied the hairy roots of apples in nurseries. And concluded that 2% to 27% of the plants had excessively hairy roots.

It seems that this country has many contenders for the Ig Nobel Prize, a parody of the Nobel Prize that is given out annually to ten research works that, "make people laugh and then think". In 2002, an Indian pair did win the award. KP Sreekumar and late G Nirmalan bagged the Mathematics Ig Nobel when they attempted to calculate the total surface; of an elephant.

Of course, they belonged to the Kerala Agriculture University. Vice chancellor of the Mumbai University, Vijay Khole, says that it is time universities improve the quality of research. "In the name of having more, research papers and mentoring more fellows, guides fall to levels where they accept repetitive problems and ideas," he says.

In fact, almost every university in Maharashtra, at some point or other, has accepted research on the enzyme system in the gut of pigeons belonging to some district or other. The gut of pigeons from Jalna, Beed, Nashik and other districts have been studied by different scholars. They will be studied in the future too.

End